

Essential Tennis Podcast #154

Welcome to the Essential Tennis Podcast. If you love tennis and want to improve your game, this podcast is for you.

Whether it's technique, strategy, equipment or the mental game, tennis professional Ian Westermann is here to make you a better player. And now, here's Ian!

Ian: Hi and welcome to the Essential Tennis Podcast. Your place for free, expert tennis instruction that can truly help you improve your game.

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Thanks for joining me on today's show and I've got a great guest, Dr. Patrick Cohen-- a mental toughness expert. He and I talk about three great topics.

Before we get to that, I want to let you all know that doubles domination 2.0 is coming up very soon. I've been working really hard on it. It's going to be awesome. Much much better than the first release that I had which was still a good product. But doubles domination 2.0 is going to be much improved. A lot more content. A lot of video content. And it's going to cover a much wider range of topics.

Definitely a more advanced course than the first one was.

If you want to be up to date on what's happening and when it starts coming out, go to doublesdomination.com and put in your name and email address, and you'll know as soon as I start releasing information about it.

That will be in a couple weeks-- I just wanted to give you guys a heads up and let you know that it's coming. I'm really excited for the release of the second version of that product.

Alright, let's get down to business. Sit back, relax and get ready for some great tennis instruction.

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My guest today on the podcast is Dr. Patrick Cohn. He is a master mental game coach and is the author of sportspsychologytennis.com. He also has a podcast dedicated to mental toughness in tennis which is called the Tennis Psychology Podcast.

I definitely suggest that all of you listening go check it out. It's a great show.

Dr. Cohn, I think you've done 70+ episodes now?

Dr. Cohn: Yeah, I think we are up to about 70 episodes. Really short episodes. Just Q&A, people send in questions or we use survey questions and we only take about 3 or 4 minutes to answer the questions so they are real short.

Ian: It's a great resource. And mental toughness questions are one of the most common on my show. So I know that my listeners are interested in that topic.

I went and checked out your website before we started recording here, and you've got them all archived which is great.

So a lot of good topics and I definitely recommend that all my listeners go check it out.

Dr. Cohn, before we get to our questions, can you please tell those of my listeners who maybe haven't heard our previous shows, which by the way, you should definitely go check those out. Can you please give a little bit of background on yourself for those that aren't familiar with you yet?

Dr. Cohn: I'm primarily a mental coach-- that's all I do is work on the mental game. I've been working with junior tennis players for about 4 or 5 years.

But I've been involved in mental coaching for over 20 years now. And the main website that we have is peaksports.com and that's the mother ship. But we also have sportspsychologytennis.com which is devoted to tournament tennis players and helping tournament tennis players improve their mental game.

So that's my specialty. I only work specifically on helping players with the mental game.

Ian: Awesome. It's a great topic for tennis players. I'm happy to have you on the show again. Thanks for spending your time with me and my listeners.

Dr. Cohn: No problem. Glad to join you.

Ian: Alright, let's go ahead and start answering some questions. And I've got four of them here. Two of them are within the same category. We'll go ahead and start with that.

It has to do with the area of choking which I know you are very familiar with in a lot of different areas and sports that you work with.

So I'll go ahead and read those questions quickly and then we'll talk about it.

The first person who asked about choking was Karen in Cali. She is a 4.0 player. She wrote to me and said, "I've been in matches where I am up 5-2 in the first set and I end up losing the first set in a tie-break. This has happened to me three times now. I'm wondering if it's my mental toughness that is to blame such that I get tight and I don't go for my shots as much when I'm leading. Or my opponents just figure me out.

And then Robert in Sweden, a 3.5 player, wrote and said, "When I'm playing matches on a recreational basis, I often find myself loosening my grip on the match when I'm ahead. Typically this is after winning the first set relatively easily and then losing the second set after playing really bad tennis. I know of the term choking and think that's what is in play here but I can't get out of this bad mental state."

So Dr. Cohn, what do you think? How do we avoid playing well initially and then choking, giving away the match and starting to play poorly.

Dr. Cohn: Great question that you are getting from your listeners and your readers.

Let me throw out some terms first because I don't want to automatically assume that these people that are writing in are choking. Because we use choking a lot and I think tennis players can understand choking.

So I think what we want to start to talk about Ian is number one, what is choking? What is a comfort zone which I think maybe in play here. And we want to talk about momentum.

Those are three psychological characteristics that can happen during the match. And I believe first of all, you have to take a look at what's the difference between being in a comfort zone and choking. And can they be related in some way?

So first of all, choking to me is a response to extreme pressure that an athlete feels or places on him or herself.

We have to understand that pressure doesn't come from the match situation. Just because you are leading 5-2, that's not pressure in itself. It's how you interpret what is going on for you in that match. And that's really where the source of pressure comes from.

People talk about pressure situation, pressure points. They are only pressure if you perceive it in that way. And you put expectations and you put pressure on yourself.

So typically choking is when you're putting a lot of pressure on yourself and you start to tighten up and lose what I call trust in your skills; trust in your strokes.

So that can be one explanation for what's going on. But typically, for me, choking it doesn't happen when you are in command of the match, right?

To me, when you are in command of the match, it's typically a comfort zone issue.

Now not to many people talk about comfort zone, but I'm very familiar with comfort zone. And in any situation, when we are talking about a comfort zone, is when you have a lead on your opponents. And maybe you are a little bit uncomfortable with that lead. Maybe you didn't expect to be up 5-2 in the first set.

And that's where the term comfort zone comes from. It comes from where you have a specific expectation about how you think you are supposed to play the match. Who is supposed to be leading. Who is supposed to be winning the match. It's based on a lot of pre-conceived expectations that you have.

Typically when a player gets up 5-2 and is in command, they are playing well. There is no reason to have a choking response.

I think some of the tension comes in, but it's more about protecting the lead. When an athlete or when a tennis player is in the lead-- even a team can do this-- when a team is in the lead and they start protecting the lead, they don't play their normal style of tennis.

In addition to not playing their normal style which got them in the lead in first place, they are starting to worry about 'don't mess this up.'

Now, the don't mess up can lead to some of the getting tight. Some of the tension. Maybe some anxiety and now you aren't going for shots. You are trying to play safe. I also call it, you are playing more defensively.

Not from a strategy position, but more defensively from an attitude type mentality such as don't miss the shot. Don't hit it long. Don't double fault.

So you start looking at what not to do which can cause you to tighten as well.

Now, does that sound like a choking response or does that sound like you are protecting your lead? That's the question I think.

Ian: That's interesting. I don't think that I've ever heard anybody raise it quite that way as far as splitting those two things up into two separate categories? I think that's really interesting.

I've heard a lot of other people describe what you are talking about-- they are protecting the lead as playing not to lose as opposed to playing to win. Does that sound about right?

Dr. Cohn: Yes. I would say that falls under the same category-- playing not to lose.

In this case, it's playing not to screw up a lead, right? Because you are not losing. You are playing to not mess up the lead. Let's just get through the match.

The other concept which I'll throw in the mix is momentum. As you know and I'm sure you've talked about on your podcast quite a bit is the importance of this physiological momentum.

When you give an opponent momentum, and you get loose and you drop a couple of games. And you give them the momentum shifts to your opponents, that can also change the dynamics of what is going on within the set itself.

If you get a little bit protective because of this comfort zone, and you want to sit on the lead, then you give up the momentum, the momentum switches to your opponent. Now your opponent has confidence and now you are reeling because you had a 5-2 lead and it just slipped away to a 5-4 lead.

That can also change the dynamics completely of the match as well.

So I don't want your listeners to strictly look at it as "I'm choking. I blew a 5-2 lead."

There is lots of other factors that can go into it such as changes in momentum. Comfort zone and sitting on the lead.

It could be that you perceive it as a pressure situation and tighten up and do choke in that situation.

Ian: Going back to comfort zone, you talked about how very often players get outside of their comfort zone because maybe whatever is happening within the match, doesn't really line up with what they are expectations were going into it.

Can you give some tips on-- what should our expectations be? Should we go into the

match with positive expectations? Should we go into a match with kind of a neutral feeling with no expectations?

From a mental toughness standpoint, what is the best way to handle that?

Dr. Cohn: Good point. First of all, my theory is that you don't want to have expectations about who is supposed to win or lose a match.

You want to go in and play your style of tennis that is going to be suitable for you. And understand your opponents weaknesses and base your style of tennis on what your strengths are and what your opponents weaknesses are.

So, that's the first thing.

You really don't want expectations, you want a high level of confidence. And I've talked about this with you on previous shows that my formula that I talk about is having no expectations yet having high confidence.

So if you go into a match and you think, I haven't beat this person in 3 previous matches. It's going to be a really close match. There is not a great probability that I'm going to win the match.

If you go in with that type of thinking and you are up 5-2, that's where the protective defensive behaviour comes in because it doesn't match what you previously thought about. Because for whatever reason, you are up and you didn't expect it to be that easy. You didn't expect you'd be up 5-2.

So that's when you go, wow, I could win the first set. And you slam on the breaks and play protective.

That's the example. So, step number one we could say is don't have any expectations at all about who is supposed to win the match and how easily the match is going to go.

Step number two, and it's probably even more important... When you realize you are leading and you start to think don't mess it up. Don't screw this up, you have this in hand. That's when you have to make the adjustment mentally.

You have to tell yourself, keep going for your shots. Keep playing the same style that you played with that got you in this position. Play one point at a time and let's make sure I stay aggressive and do the things that got me in this position in the first place.

So, on one side Ian is the player who is going to say don't hit it out. Don't double fault. Make sure you pull this set out.

On the other hand is the other player who is trying to finish it out strongly. Keep playing aggressive and pressure your opponent into making mistakes off the court, someone that's being more in that offensive mindset.

So essentially, and I don't mean to simplify this, instead of going defense, you have on the stay on the offensive mentally. I'm not so much talking about strategy now. But I'm saying you have to be aware when you go into protect mode. And be able to counter that and make the adjustment and stay on the offense mentally.

Ian: So it sounds from a mental perspective, going into a match with pre-conceived notions or expectations is never really a great thing, is it?

Dr. Cohn: No. It doesn't help.

Ian: Great. Thanks for the explanation. I enjoy talking about that.

Let's go ahead and go to our next one. We've got two more quick ones to get too.

Next up is Andy in Cali, he wrote and said, "I'm a junior player and have sort of a mental toughness problem. Whenever I'm playing a match or trying something new, I will sometimes not execute a certain shot correctly, miss it and try to fix the problem.

If I do fix the problem, all is well. But if I don't, I continue trying to fix it. After several attempts to remedy the problem, I end up getting down on myself and getting frustrated. So basically, if I don't mess up, I don't get mad. But if I do mess up, I do get mad.

Is there any way to develop an attitude to avoid getting mad when I mess up?

Dr. Cohn: You must have hand picked this question for me.

Ian: I didn't, but it's a good one.

You and I, I remember talked about perfectionism and this kind of attitude previously. But we didn't go into much depth, so I'm looking forward to the explanation there.

Dr. Cohn: So let me start with a short story. I was warming up with my daughter who plays in the 12-14 group here in Florida. She is working at making some changes to her serve.

She said, "Can you take a look at what I'm doing here." And I said, "No. A warm up is a warm up. Do not practice in your warm up. It's the time to get loose and to get ready."

The same goes for the match. When you are in a match, it's not time to fix anything because then you are just over analyzing your game.

If it's broken, and you are trying to fix it, it's not going to get better by the end of the match most likely. Unless it's a really tiny adjustment that you can make, like better foot work.

I don't ever want my students to get into the fix it mode, and try to correct something that they think is wrong which may not need correcting in the first place, right?

So, what do you do in that situation? My recommendation is simple. After you make a mistake, just take the swing that you wanted and feel the shot that you wanted and then just let it go.

So that's for the over analysis part.

So once you've done that, and you said you'll fix it in your next practice, that's really what I want you to do is say, "I'll fix it in my next practice, let's get through the match."

My recommendation is go to your go to shot for example-- go to your bread and butter

shot. Don't feel that you have to keep going back to the well if that shot isn't working. Or if your top spin backhand isn't working, go to the slice. Go to something that you can get through the match which is going to be functional and work for you.

So that's another way to deal with this over analysis-- I need to fix it now. You don't need to fix it now. Just find the stroke that is working and get through the match.

As opposed to getting mad, that's kind of a completely different situation for me. Because there are two situations we are talking about. We're talking about the over analysis of trying to fix something in the middle of the match. And then we are talking about getting mad and emotionally getting upset with yourself.

I break it down into the two different mental games.

As far as getting mad, it starts once again and I go back to expectations, it starts with your expectations.

If you expect to make no errors or execute all your routine shots for example and you don't, it's going to be a lot easier for you to become frustrated with yourself.

The second part of that is how you react to that. How you react or behave after the error-- what you are thinking. What most people don't consider is, they look at it as a stimulus response. If I miss a routine shot, I should automatically be upset. If I double fault, I should automatically be upset. If I miss an easy volley, I should automatically be upset.

What they don't get is what happens in between the error and their emotional reaction is what they are thinking about that error.

This comes straight out of the book of a psychologist named [inaudible] and I've kind of adapted some of his work.

But basically what it is saying, your thinking or your belief process about the error that ultimately causes you to be frustrated.

It's not the fact that you made an error.

Ellis would say, people are not upset by things that happened to them like mistakes or things they do. They are upset by how they think about those things.

So it goes back to dealing with your thinking process, your reaction and your belief.

So instead of thinking I should never double fault, this really stinks. You need to change that thinking to make the mistake OK in your mind temporarily. That's how I simplify it... How can you make that mistake in your mind OK... We know it's not OK, but we need to make it OK so you can play the next point without the monkey on the back.

My work with that player, I might say, "Alright, double faults happen. You're not perfect. You're not a machine. Pros make double faults."

I was watching Klojsters and she double faulted this morning. She didn't let it get to her and bother her on the next service.

So, you have to be able to rationalize with yourself so that you can have a better emotional reaction.

So it's kind of like, it's a two pronged approach. The expectations that you take into the match to set you up for feeling frustrated, and then also, you have to work with your thought process and your belief system about those errors in that moment, so that you have something different to go to.

Ian: I find that as a teacher and a coach, I think that is one of the things to work with students on. Especially those that are really motivated and really working hard and they want to do their best is that they come out to perform hopefully to the best of their ability. And yet, when they make mistakes, I think it's very difficult for somebody with that kind of goal for that day in tennis to be OK with screwing up and not doing something to the absolute best of their ability.

It's a difficult balance, isn't it?

Dr. Cohn: Absolutely. But I'm going to add something to what you just said, I'm sure you worked with players, perfectionists, you are working on a stroke with them. They've made an adjustment and they are just hitting everything into the bottom of the net.

But worse than that, they can't work through that change with you. They are so emotional distraught, that the lesson is done. You can't work with that player because they've checked out emotions that have been checked out from the lesson and they think they are inadequate.

I'm sure you've been there, right?

Ian: Absolutely. And in a competitive setting, how many times have you seen a player just give away a match due to that kind of attitude as well?

Dr. Cohn: Same thing. Well if they do it in practice, you know it's going to be three times as bad in the match.

If I see that going on in practice, I know that in a match situation, it's going to be even tougher for them to control that. They do absolutely check out...

A lot of the times, that's where the tanking response comes from. That's what I've seen, where a player losses 7-6 or 7-5 and they'll be so upset and distraught that they'll tank the second set because they are so upset.

Ian: Sure.

Dr. Cohn: I don't know if I answered your question, but if you could go back and give me the question again or the follow up on that, I'd be happy...

Ian: I think we covered it pretty well. We have one more to get to still, so I'd actually like to move on if that's OK.

Good conversation on that. I know that's going to be helpful for Andy.

Lastly, we've got a question from Jeannie and I'm curious to see your answer to this one.

She wrote and said, "I have a problem that I struggle with when winning. I start to feel sorry for my opponent. I was in a 3.5 singles tournament a couple of years ago, won the first set easily 6-1, my significantly younger opponent was hitting fiercely but many of the shots were going out.

I'm a steady, with good mental toughness except for this feeling sorry business. After the first set, which I won 6-1, the opponent was obviously mentally distressed. She took a bathroom break, she came back and she was hitting without pace and very loopy. I took the bait and went for winners that I shouldn't have.

She won 6-4, same with the 3rd set. She looked so happy at the end, I felt that I had done a good deed in losing. But a few hours later, I realized what I had done.

Is this something you've ever dealt with? Having students who actually had sympathy for an opponent?

Dr. Cohn: Yes. It's not quite as common of question that I get. This is a little bit off the beaten track.

I have dealt with this. Jeannie, bottom line is you are too nice. I'm sure you are a really nice lady and that's part of the problem.

What she's saying here, feeling sorry for your opponent, that means you care too much about really what other thing. In other words, I believe and I'm making some assumptions, that Jeannie wants to be liked by others. Jeannie likes that respect and we call it social approval in my work.

The moment you start feeling sorry for an opponent, what you are saying is "I want that person to do well. I want that person to like me."

You have to become a competitor. When you step on that court, you can't feel sorry for your opponent. And I've heard this from some of the younger junior tennis players that I've worked with, is they are friends with some of them..... Another reason is, maybe she doesn't want to upset the friendship as well. And once again, it goes back to wanting to be perceived as nice. Worrying about how others perceive them. And really doesn't want to rock the boat.

The bottom line, I'm just setting some ground work for my answer, when you step on the court, you have to transform into a competitor. You are no longer the street person or the student. Now you are the warrior tennis player.

I often go back and I talk about an example from a movie with Russell Crow who is called the Gladiator. What does Russell Crow do before he goes in the competition every time? He grabs the sand and he'll start rubbing it in his hands. And you see this face come over him like he's transforming into this competitor. He is no longer this nice guy.

This is what Jeannie has to understand. You do not have to be a nice girl when it comes to playing and competing and being competitive.

This is a generalization, girls are going to have more of an issue with this than I think men.

Ian: That's interesting. Jeannie and I have exchanged some emails back and forth, and a secondary question of her was, do you feel like this is more of a female personality trait? I wasn't going to ask you actually because I didn't want to throw you under the bus with that question. But it's interesting that you bring it up.

Dr. Cohn: It is a generalization. But typically when working with my female students, they are more in tune with other's feelings. And what other's are perceiving and what other's are feeling about them.

Ian: Interesting.

Dr. Cohn: It's not across the board, but I do see some of those commonalities.

Once again, you don't have to be nice to be a competitor and go out there and perform your best. You have to put aside friendships....

Is this a friend that she is playing?

Ian: This was not.

Dr. Cohn: OK. It may even get more difficult with friends or people that she knows. But to be a competitor, you have to go out there and put the medal to the metal and not worry about what your opponent is feeling. Because feeling sorry for your opponent, what you are really saying is I'm beating you badly and you must feel really bad.

Ian: And I feel bad about that.

Interesting. Dr. Cohn, with that we are going to wrap things up and I want to thank you very much for your time and answering these questions. It's been great to have you on the show once again and I definitely encourage my listeners to go back and check out the other shows that Dr. Cohn have done together at essentialtennis.com podcast and go subscribe to Dr. Cohn's podcast as well on iTunes. It's definitely worth checking out. Lots of good, free information there.

Again, it's called The Tennis Psychology Podcast and you can check it out on his website sportspsychologytennis.com.

Dr. Cohn, thanks again for being on the show. It's been great having you.

Dr. Cohn: Thanks for having me Ian.

Ian: That does it for episode 154 of the Essential Tennis Podcast. Thank you very much for joining me on today's show. I really appreciate having you as a listener. And if you'd like to give me some feedback on this episode or if you have any follow up questions about anything that Dr. Cohn and I talked about. Any comments, anything that you disagree about, I'd love to hear from you.

All you have to do is go to essentialtennis.com podcast, go to this episode, 154, and leave a comment. I'd love to read it and reply and I like to hear what you guys are thinking after each of these episodes.

Now I'd like to read two comments that were left about last week's show, #153. We talked about some forehand myths and I gave several drills to improve your forehand.

Jerry said, "Hi Ian, what are the targets for the shots hit in the Spanish drill?" The Spanish drill is an excellent practice drill, working on positioning.

Jerry, typically when I have students do the Spanish drill, I don't give them specific targets, instead we really focus in on footwork, positioning correctly-- every ball should be struck at a comfortable spot around waist height. And we focus on technique.

So this is a drill or a time during a lesson or practice where my student is really focusing in on those elements... Obviously, ultimately where the ball goes is important, but we are really focusing just on those elements right now.

The only instruction I really give is don't hit me because I'm standing in the court in front of them.

I usually tell them to just hit the ball straight ahead and focus on the positioning and the technique at this point.

Secondly, I want to read a comment from Lloyd. Lloyd and I went back and forth several times in the comments for episode 153. He had some good observations. And something I want to address real quickly...

He wrote and said, "Nadal starts his forehand with the racket up, does a partial C, and then the racket head definitely slows down a bit before he lays his wrist back to buggy whip the racket head. You can the buggy whip a small C but he doesn't have his wrist open as far as it can go until he does the whip.

I've seen this buggy whip used by a number of pros when I slow mo their shots with my PVR. Is there a reason why you advise against incorporating a buggy whip since this technique adds a lot of racket head speed?"

I wrote a good response to Lloyd there in the comments and you can go check that out. He responded again as we went back and forth a couple of different times. And basically my response to Lloyd is that, I believe it's not so much that lane, the wrist and the hand back creates racket head speed. I believe that the lane back of the hand and the wrist is there because of the huge acceleration because of the racket head speed. Because Nadal is accelerating so aggressively and his arm is relaxed as he does so. As the Kinetic chain starts to unwind towards the ball and the hand, the wrist and the forehand are the last parts to kind of get dragged behind the body as the acceleration starts towards the ball. Because there is that big acceleration of the core forward towards the point of contact, the hand, because it is relaxed naturally, lays back and then he actively uses that kind of load of his forearm and hand and wrist to accelerate towards the point of contact.

So this is a technique that I believe as players start to get more advanced and as it becomes appropriate for them to start accelerating faster, I think it's something that most players will start to naturally develop. It's something that is a detail, it's a small piece in the overall puzzle of a good forehand ground stroke. And I think it's a relatively advanced technique that again, starts to develop as a player develops and as he or she starts to accelerate faster and hit more aggressively.

So it's not something that I specifically have ever taught because I think there are just much more important technical elements that need to be in place first before ever

worrying about creating racket head speed as fast as possible. Most of you listening are not at a level yet where this is something you should be concerned about.

So I'd focus on more important fundamental things first.

And as far as the racket slowing down first and this is kind of where we had our back and forth, in really slow motion, it does decelerate a little bit as it's dropping and the hand is laying back.

But you have to keep in mind, that's relative. When you look at Nadal's forehand in how ever many hundred frames per second, and it starts to slow down like what Lloyd is talking about, you have to keep in mind that it's slowing down relative to its overall speed of swing which is massive. It's huge.

It's a speed that we can't really comprehend-- not even myself as a 5.0 player. He accelerates way faster than I do and most of you listening are 3.5, 4.0 level players or maybe below that.

And so, in my opinion, this is just something that really shouldn't even be considered by recreational players. Definitely not at first-- maybe once you start getting towards high 4.0 or 4.5, you can maybe start thinking about this and taking a look at it.

But I know that most of my listeners aren't up to that level yet, so it's something that I feel is not essential.

So, you can go read all of my comments at essentialtennis.com podcast. And again, that was for episode 153.

Jerry and Lloyd, thank you both for your comments. It's great conversing with both of you on the website. If you have any comments about today's show, go leave them for episode 154.

I'd love to respond to those.

Alright, that does it for today's show. Thanks for listening everybody. Take care and good luck with your tennis.